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THE U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BRIEF BACKGROUND

First, America no longer has to worry that Moscow will exploit simmering tensions between Israel and the Arabs to expand Moscow's own influence in the region. Moscow seeks Western assistance in solving its economic problems and is unlikely to jeopardize this to make marginal gains in the Middle East. Yevgeny Primakov, then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's chief Middle East adviser, noted on September 4, 1991, that "Middle East issues have retreated and do not now have a place in our current thinking " (Interview with London-based Arab newspaper, Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, cited in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report Near East and South Asia, September 6, 1991, p 1)

Second, after the end of the Cold War there is little chance that an Arab-Israeli crisis could escalate into a superpower military confrontation. This, after all, is what made the thought of conflagration in the Middle East so terrifying. This worry is now gone. It is extremely unlikely that a democratic Russia will risk a war with America on behalf of Arab Countries that, in any event, are critical of Russia's political and economic reforms and its retrenchment. For example, Russia's relations with the PLO were strained severely by the PLO's support for the abortive August 1991 Soviet coup. The head of the PLO's Political Department, Faruq Qaddumi, applauded the coup and gushed, "We support the friendly Soviet Union in its new era " (Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report Near East and South Asia, August 20, 1991, p 1)

Third, the risk that Arab-Israeli tensions will threaten the continued flow of Gulf oil has been reduced by the deterioration of relations between the PLO and the oil-rich Arab Gulf states. For the foreseeable future, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, stung by Palestinian support for Iraqi aggression, are extremely unlikely to launch an oil embargo against the U S , their chief protector, as they did at the time of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.

THE "PEACE PROCESS"

An Arab-Israeli settlement, of course, is an appropriate and laudable U S foreign policy goal. But too often the State Department treats the "peace process" as an end to itself. If progress towards peace stalls, then the US bends over backwards to preserve the illusion of movement. As a result, American policy often becomes hostage to the fragile "peace process". Washington acts as if Arab-Israeli peace is more important to America than it is to the parties involved. This leads astute negotiators on both sides to try to wring the maximum amount of concessions from the U S before seriously sitting down to negotiate with each other. The obsessive approach to the mechanical "peace process" leads to constant U S interventions that encourage the negotiators to cling to the hope that America eventually will force a settlement. This harms the prospects for a settlement because a lasting peace can only be attained by the agreement of the parties involved and cannot be imposed by an outside power.

The State Department has taken a hands-on approach to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations and skillfully orchestrated the Madrid peace conference that launched the bilateral talks. But the bilateral talks have expanded now and are grinding along at a glacial pace, bogged down in

procedural issues such as where, when, and how the negotiations are to be conducted. The efforts remain at the level of talks about talks with little progress and limited results that could be destroyed any day by a single action from the PLO or the Israelis such as what is happening in Hebron and Jerusalem today. Given the more pressing issues at hand in the former Soviet Union, in Europe, Iraq and in Iran, the U S should not continue devoting such high-level attention to the torturously slow Arab-Israeli talks, which are likely to make little progress the way they are conducted and administered at the moment. The U S should appoint an ambassador-at-large as a representative to coordinate U S policy regarding the negotiations.

AMERICA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Although the Cold War is over and the superpower rivalry has abated, the Arab-Israeli conflict, inter-Arab rivalries, and Arab-Iranian tensions continue to roil the Middle East. The U S does not have the resources, will power, or imperial inclination, nor should it, to impose a Pax Americana on the Middle East that would suppress or resolve these destabilizing power struggles. The best that the U S can do is to work with the parties involved to reach a compromised negotiated settlement of outstanding issues wherever possible, and to maintain a favorable balance of power. To further American interests in the Middle East the Administration should de-emphasize the U S role in the Arab-Israeli peace talks. This will encourage the Arabs and Israelis to become accustomed to negotiating with each other, not with Washington. Although much is said about a "window of opportunity" for Middle East peace, it is more like a "keyhole of opportunity". The Middle East nations thus surely are motivated more by desire to avoid antagonizing Washington, the ascendant power in the region, than they are by a spirit of genuine reconciliation.

U.S. POLICY TOWARDS ARABIAN GULF

The chief threat to U.S. energy security is not another Arab oil embargo, but a major contraction in world oil supplies triggered by regional conflict or oil production cutbacks. This could be caused by internal instability in a leading oil producer, as during the Iranian revolution in 1978-1979. The U.S. could ride-out most oil crises with little economic damage. However, a major crisis in the Gulf that results in the complete loss of its roughly 15 million barrels per day of oil production, about 25 percent of total world oil production, temporarily would wreak havoc in the world economy. Although this scenario is extremely unlikely since some Gulf oil almost surely will continue reaching the market, the U.S. should hedge against the unknown and maintain military forces in the Gulf to help deter any aggression in the region. The use of military force should be considered only as a last resort. In the long run, America's first line of defense against oil supply crises is the free market, not the armed forces. The U.S. response to a limited economic threat should be primarily economic, not military, in nature. Absent a mortal threat to the American economy, the U.S. should seek to ride-out any oil crisis using the free market to allocate scarce oil resources, and provide incentives for greater world oil production, greater conservation, more efficient consumption, and more extensive use of alternative energy sources. Guard against the rise of a hostile hegemonic power in the Gulf. This should be done through military deterrence and security cooperation with the friendly Gulf states. America should continue as the dominant external military power in the region and the chief guarantor of the security of the conservative Arab states of the Gulf. America's goal should be the forging of a

stable regional balance of power in which Gulf oil continues to flow, unimpeded by regional conflict or the hostile policies of a regional hegemonic power. To assure this, the U S should

- 1) Maintain forces armed and equipped to project power rapidly from bases in the U S to the Gulf, even without the support of local allies This requires the deployment of strong naval forces, including at least one aircraft carrier battle group, continuously in the Gulf and Arabian Sea area, along with a quick reaction force of Marines, special forces units, and airborne troops U S fighters and bombers should be rotated continually into air bases in the area for joint training exercises To move Army tank divisions rapidly in a crisis, the U S will have to continue investing in strategic airlift and sealift capabilities, and to preposition military supplies and equipment at depots and at sea near the Gulf The American military presence on the ground in conservative Arab Gulf States should be minimized to reduce the risk of a destabilizing political backlash that fundamentalists could exploit
- 2) Deter and defend against any aggression through bilateral security arrangements with the members of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (AGCC) Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The U S should press the AGCC states to increase their military cooperation with each other as well as with Washington The U.S. should strengthen the armed forces of AGCC countries by augmenting the number and expanding the scale of joint military exercises with them, assisting them with military training, prepositioning military supplies on their territory, if possible, and increasing joint military planning U S arms sales should be

considered if they make it easier for the U S to deploy forces by encouraging a compatible defense infrastructure and if they do not significantly threaten each other's security and interests. By prepositioning military equipment in Gulf states, the U S can reduce the number of personnel it needs to keep in politically sensitive countries, while reducing the time needed to build up a military force to defend that country against external threats

- 3) Encourage the creation of an AGCC-Egyptian-Syrian alliance and the deployment of Egyptian-Syrian troops along the Saudi-Iraqi and Kuwaiti-Iraqi borders Egypt and Syria had agreed to provide the nucleus of an Arab peacekeeping force in the Gulf under the terms of the March 6, 1991, Damascus Declaration, but Saudi Arabia and Kuwait grew ambivalent, preferring to rely on the U S for protection Washington should not seek to block Syrian participation in the defense of the Gulf States and should not consider Syria itself as a threat to regional stability

U.S. POLICY TOWARDS IRAN

An important fact for the U S to remember is that, it can not deny Iran the right of being a power in its own legitimate way in the area The longtime relations between Iran and its neighbors will have to prevail in one way or another Admittedly that relation has not always been harmoniously and brotherly, nevertheless, over the centuries, both nations, Iranians and Arabs have learned to live with and manage their problems peacefully or by military conflicts

Iran is the Lion in the area and therefore, in my opinion, should be tamed and not left wild and feeling rejected, as it would be difficult for it to be accountable for its actions. It is so much easier to tame a lion by being friendly with him than by threatening him. The U.S. policy of dual containment towards Iran is not working and very expensive. Moreover, it is not succeeding in keeping Iran under control and isolated from the rest of the world especially its neighbors in the south. For a long time the U.S. has considered Iran as the potential security threat to the Gulf and to the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz and rightly so. However, a policy of constructive engagement or even selective containment, in my opinion, would work much better than the policy of dual containment that the U.S. is pursuing at the present. The language of dialogue and diplomacy should be considered as the alternative to silence and isolation.

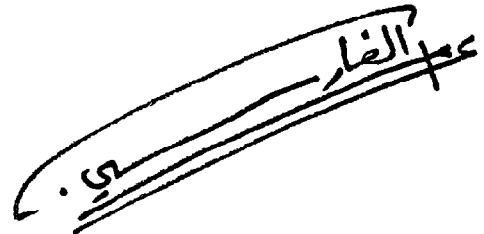
If the U.S. is to take any military action against Iran as a result of their involvement in terrorism activities or any other reason, that action will only bring the Iranians closer to each other and to their Government. If the U.S. wants to do something about the Iranian regime, such as removing it, then it should seek its self-distraction through support to the adversaries and oppositions rather than isolating it.

The latest reports on U.S. policy towards Iran are encouraging, and the recommendations made by Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Richard Murphy are pointing to the right direction. The recommendations mentioned basically say that, the U.S. has to change its policies towards Iran from dual containment to a more flexible and responsive policies such as the ones I discussed.

CONCLUSION

The collapse of Soviet power and diminution of the Soviet threat to American interests in the Middle East should allow America to redefine its interest in protecting the Arabian Gulf oil. Since no power now has the military means to deny long-term Western access to the Gulf oil, the energy security problem now can be defined more as an economic than a strategic threat. This allows America, cushioned by the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, to make the free market, rather than the U S armed forces, the first line of defense against oil supply crises. America should retain an interest, however, in keeping military forces in the vicinity of the Gulf to prevent any country from establishing hegemony over the Gulf oil. America's goal should be to deny any body a monopoly over the enormous oil wealth of the Gulf, which they could use to build an arsenal that would make them much greater threats to U S interests and the Gulf security. The collapse of Soviet power also reduces the importance to America of pushing Arab-Israeli peace negotiations forward. Washington should continue its efforts to mediate such negotiations but should not sacrifice or jeopardize its relations in an overeager attempt to accelerate negotiations. Real peace will require a solid Arab-Israeli relationship and only will be attained after years of arduous negotiations. Washington must focus on the long-term goal of peace rather than become obsessed with the short-term "peace process." Compared with the Gulf, the Arab-Israeli Theater is a minor strategic sideshow from Washington's perspective. The U S therefore should be much more concerned about who controls Gulf oil than about that controls the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Golan Heights. The Administration should reshape its anachronistic Middle East policy. It should break the bonds of the conventional wisdom that prevailed before the collapse of Soviet power. The immediate challenges to U S interests posed by Iraq and Iran overshadow the long-

term dangers posed by Arab-Israeli tensions The Administration therefore should concentrate more on the pressing threats to America's interests in the Gulf and avoid being bogged down in the quagmire of the Arab-Israeli "peace process " The U S policy towards Iran and Iraq should change from dual containment to a constructive engagement and the art of diplomacy should be exercised



Colonel Ali Bin Mohammed Al-Farsi

April 27, 1997

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